

Cathy Harrington

June 12, 2019

The Honorable Donetta W. Ambrose
United States District Court
Western District of Pennsylvania
Joseph F. Weis Jr., U.S. Courthouse
700 Grant Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Dear Judge Ambrose,

Because of my experience of losing my daughter to murder in 2004, I have devoted much of my life to doing anything that I can to help families of murdered victims find their way through the nightmare they suddenly find themselves in.

On November 1, 2004, my 26-year-old daughter, Leslie, was murdered along with her roommate, Adrienne. From the day of the murders until the summer of 2006 my family was stalked by the media, my daughter's life was exploited in a true crime paperback, and the case received national attention with television shows that sensationalized her life. Needless to say, it was impossible to grieve my daughter's death, and we felt trapped in a nightmare with no end.

In 2006 a Defense-Victim Outreach Specialist began working with me and my family on behalf of the defense team for the man charged in the murders. It was then that my family and I finally began to feel that we had some control over our lives. Our DVO took no side except our own and listened to our concerns. She spent hours researching and talking with the defense team to find answers to every question that we had. She helped us understand the judicial process and empowered us to ask for what we needed and wanted. She never told us how we should feel or react. She helped us understand that every emotion we experienced was valid and listened and affirmed us at every step. She helped us as we struggled to survive the stress of police investigations, interviews by detectives, hearings, appeals, TV cameras, invasion of our privacy, financial expense and the intense waves of grief and fear that affected us. She sat with me at each significant hearing and meeting, offering support with a simple and silent sack of scones, hard candy, tissue, or by simply reaching out and holding my hand. Our DVO's only goal was to help meet the needs of the victims' families, to fight for us, and to honor the memory of our daughters.

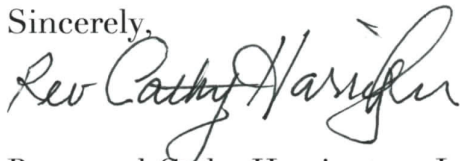
Most importantly, she never let the prosecution or the defense forget that Leslie and Adrienne were wonderful young women who, at all times, deserved to be treated with dignity and respect.

Over the years, I've often thought about the role of a victim outreach specialist and have been reminded of my training as a chaplain in a major trauma hospital (a requirement for my work as a Unitarian Universalist minister). I would say that attorneys are like doctors in that they are too busy dealing with the case to have time to be fully present for patients. Chaplains, on the other hand, are afforded the time to be fully present, to listen and hold the sacred space of grief, pain, and the unspeakable. This is the work of victim outreach specialists.

Eventually my family and I decided on our own that we did not want to suffer through a lengthy trial, but we needed assurance that the murderer would be in prison forever. Our DVO specialist helped us make a list of our needs and desires and created a bridge of dialogue between the defense and prosecution. When there was a possibility that the defendant would plead "no contest," we talked with her about what that meant, and realized that we instead wanted the defendant to face the truth of his actions and we insisted that he plead guilty rather than "no contest." The plea agreement that was finally reached assured us that the murderer would waive his rights to appeals, would never be released from prison, and could never speak about the murders to anyone, especially the media.

It wasn't until the judicial process was complete that we could begin to honor Leslie's legacy and begin to make meaning out of the meaningless. The years have graced me with the capacity to experience joy in life again, though there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about Leslie and ache to hold her. The adversarial judicial system only hurts victim's families when it ignores their needs. The DVO specialist met those needs and my family and I are forever grateful to her for giving us our lives back.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rev. Cathy Harrington". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Reverend Cathy Harrington, Interim Minister
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Gainesville